

"DEMOCRACY'S RACE AGAINST TIME"

ADDRESS

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There are particular reasons why I am grateful for this opportunity to speak tonight to the Young Democratic Club of New York and this gathering of well-wishers.

Other speakers have referred to the honor conferred upon me by nomination for the high office of Solicitor General of the United States. The Solicitor General is the chief advocate for public causes before the Supreme Court of the United States. The office is probably the only office every lawyer happy in the work of his profession covets.

If, however, the Senate takes a charitable attitude toward my nomination, my responsibilities will be more exclusively professional and will not permit me the luxury of political controversy.

And so tonight may be my last opportunity for some time to speak with comparative freedom about some of our political and social problems. For me this may be a sort of bachelor dinner.

The platform of this Young Democratic Club of New York -- opens this way: "We proclaim the right of young men to share in the councils of government."

The councils of government were filled with young men in the Golden Age of creative ability in American public affairs, the age of the Founding Fathers. Today it is unhappily exceptional that a young Bob Wagner can so soon be established in a successful legislative career. But the early councils of the Republic were filled with young Bob Wagners.

That period of the Founding Fathers greatly interests me because it seems very close to us in the nature of its problems and of the attitude needed to meet them. As in our time, men faced the double difficulty of

economic transition at home and the disturbance of war abroad. As in our time, the world was going through a major change of ideas about the responsibility of governments to their people. As in our time, every big problem of government or commerce turned out on close examination to be a nest of related problems, of economics, politics, morals, and social values, all mixed up together.

It took over a decade of day to day education in chaotic circumstances to teach enough young men to outgrow old prejudices and sectionalisms and merge their differences in a constructive program of government. The upheaval of the Revolution forced young men of business and property, as well as young men without business or property, into the generalized interest in everything which we call politics, into great questions of social organization and administration.

Most of the men of the Constitutional Convention had earned substantial property with their own efforts. They had a real stake in the existing order. They wanted to keep it.

The lesson clearly taught by their times was that they must reform to preserve, and with the calm courage of men long under fire they accepted the facts.

Where they lacked experience, they had the imagination to dare, as Justice Brandeis has said, to "let their minds be bold". Their course showed far more courage than our times ask of us. They took the risks of making the first effort in history to establish representative democratic government on a large scale and to free their system of private enterprise from the restraints of the King's monopolies.

They took those risks on intellectual appreciation of the theory of democracy rather than on experience with it. Today we have behind us one hundred fifty years of experience with their theories. That experience has proved to us that political democracy and free private profit enterprise are indispensable to each other, but that taken together they can be successful and can give us what we want. Yet we falter in meeting the demands of our times merely to provide the conditions which will preserve that dual system.

The Founding Fathers had a problem of tolerance. It was to protect the individual and the human rights of minorities from the aggressions of temporary majorities. We, too, have a problem of tolerance. Ours is to persuade class conscious and economically powerful minorities to tolerate the political majority in its efforts to adapt our democracy to our times so that it will have a chance to survive.

And I have no doubt that history will say that the present political majority has better heeded counsels of tolerance and moderation in the exercise of its power to change, than has the minority in the use of its liberty to object.

Recent European events have dramatized a peril to democracy which should make all men of intelligence and good will try in good faith to reconcile differences.

However politically expedient it may be to advance universal formulae for settling our economic order, as practical men we know that we have a great many separate and concrete problems which will have to

be separately solved by men really willing to buckle down to them. But in a general way I am sure business would approach government in a different light if it would take account of some of the basic considerations that move government, but with which men in the ordinary course of trade are not normally obliged to take into their calculations.

Until recently government made no effort to show the business man why he should not look at his own business and its prospect for profit as a problem complete in itself. But government is now, of necessity, concerned with the functioning of business as a complete system of exchange for national production and distribution. Idle men today offer their toil in a market which does not hire. Idle capital offers its goods in a market which does not buy. The process of exchange of services for wages and of wages for the products of factory and farm suffers recurring partial paralysis.

The economic intelligence and political philosophy of the times give the government no choice but to meet a situation like that. The modern American has been made conscious by business itself what our national resources are, and what they can be made to provide. They are not willing to accept economic theory as a substitute for goods. They will not patiently accept as inevitable periodic unemployment and destruction of the value of homes and savings to which they have given their lives. The manager may have to close the factory or the banker foreclose the mortgage. But if he does he forces government to find work for the unemployed and to shelter the dispossessed.

Naturally under these circumstances people in government try to discourage business from letting such burdens come to government and talk a new language of business responsibility which to some business men is strange and irritating. But to a realist, those strange new words simply mirror strange new facts - the facts that private business under modern conditions has obtained power and therefore has attracted obligations which approach those of public government. A great corporation which employs thousands of family breadwinners represents a stronger and more immediate force in governing the lives and the standard of living of those families than does public government. The sense of dependence of those families upon the corporation gives them a sense of expectancy from the corporation. Responsibility follows power today just as surely as it has through all history.

Justice Brandeis once spoke about business as a "noble profession". When it is carried on with an open-eyed assumption of the risk of these inevitable responsibilities, it is a noble profession. To see the big problems of the relations of business to labor and the public, to organize the administration of endless detail, to have the courage to take many of the ultimate risks of society - and do all these at once asks for the biggest men we can find. When, early in the depression, before government had awakened to the disastrous consequences of irregularity of employment and of impoverished age, Mr. Gerard Swope overlooked short-range interest and gave the benefit of responsible business support to unemployment compensation and old-age benefits, he was living up to the requirements of business as a "noble profession".

There are other situations in which government has to look at a problem in a different light from the individual business man. The business man is not easily interested in distant reforms if he is showing losses from quarter to quarter. But the government whose first duty is to preserve the future of the nation has to try to live, not from quarter to quarter, not even from decade to decade, but actually from generation to generation.

The raw materials which might yield a bigger profit today from more intense exploitation may be the very natural resources which the nation wants to conserve to give a break to the next generation so that there may be profits tomorrow. Men and women important to an employer only as a labor supply are important to government as practically the only class in the population that is really reproducing itself. The future of America is being cradled in the humble homes where wages go.

The nation cannot afford to let these homes be demoralized with periodic unemployment. The nation cannot afford to let hope and courage be taken out of these homes just because their breadwinners have reached forty-five years of age. The nation cannot afford the denial of a decent standard of living to the mothers and fathers of the generation that will possess our earth in 1960.

Those agreeable political scientists, Messrs. Gilbert and Sullivan, have assured us,

"That every boy and every girl who's born into the  
world alive

Is either a little liberal or else a little  
conservative".

But thinking men, whether liberal or conservative, know that we cannot go on as we have been going. Stated in the abstract, there are few men in business who admit that they disagree with the President's objectives. The real difference between the business man preoccupied with his own affairs and the government official who feels the winds blowing from every quarter is a difference in the sense of timing. Shall we move while we still can control our direction, or shall we wait, as some European countries have waited, for events to push us around?

Over a year ago the President pointed out that the most significant fact in the modern world was the new speed with which events moved and with which human forces once years agathering blew up over night. However small or great our external dangers from the troubles across the waters, there never has been any doubt that a major disturbance in Europe would sweep against us swirls of ideas which would sorely test the satisfaction of every class of our population with our way of life. Ever since we emerged from the mess of 1929, we have been racing against time in a campaign of preparedness in our internal social relations. The Roosevelt administration has been perfectly conscious of the timing involved to get us safely over into a system of democracy and true private enterprise that will be proof against the seduction of other ways of life.

Never forget that our political and economic system, of whose shortcomings even we in this country are acutely conscious, have ceased to work completely in most of the rest of the world.

In other lands people did not deliberately abandon that system. Political democracy and private economic enterprise were forsaken only

because they had failed to deal adequately and in time with the economic problems of the Twentieth Century. The recent successes of political and economic dictators have put us, as well as them, on trial.

The events of the last week need not frighten us. But they cannot help jarring us into the realization that in this day and generation the time to reach for any objective generally agreed upon, is now.

I agree with Justice Holmes who had little belief in panaceas and almost none in sudden ruin. Heroic periods of history when great things are in the making are never easy on the nerves of all the participants. But we are a new and enterprising race sprung from the most venturesome of all the peoples of Europe. And in every difficulty there has emerged among us a leader who not only embodies the inarticulate instinct of the time, but who has the genius to give play to the abilities of other men; a leader who is magnetic enough to galvanize into a single current all the best impulses of his generation; and a leader whose strength can take in stride the thrust of a thousand forces which few of us will ever know or understand.

Such a debt as we acknowledge to Washington, Jefferson, Jackson and Lincoln, future generations -- yes, and even our generation -- will acknowledge to Franklin D. Roosevelt.